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You're right, Chet. You're right. And you're fired.

Why read about Chester Bowles? Because he was right most of the time and he was ignored most of the time, with tragic results for his country—results we might avoid in the future by understanding why he was right and why he was ignored.

by Harris Wofford

A generation later, it is difficult to recall what Chester Bowles represented to many Americans. Not only had he been right about the Bay of Pigs, for more than a decade he had been laying foundations among the public for a new foreign policy that would point in the opposite direction from the CIA's action in Cuba. Along with Justice Douglas, Bowles had opposed the CIA intervention in Iran to overthrow Prime Minister Mossadegh and bring back the Shah. Although the Kennedys tended to view the former governor, ambassador, congressman, and OPA chief as a liberal ideologue, in his talks around the country and through his writings, Bowles had been able to reach beyond the liberal Democratic constituency to appeal to a wide cross-section of Democrats, Republicans, and independents. For many of them, as for me, Bowles's standing within the administration was a test of the President's intentions in foreign policy.

The week after the defeat at the Bay of Pigs early in 1961, Bowles attended a meeting of the National Security Council at the President's request. It was "the grimmest gathering in my experience in government," Bowles said afterwards. He found the 30 highest officials of the government "emotional, almost savage."

Facing Fidel

The militant "get Castro" mood alarmed Bowles, who noted that Robert Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, as newcomers to the foreign field, were easy targets for the "military-CIA-paramilitary type answers" that predominated in the discussion. Afterwards, "as a friend," Bowles asked to speak to the President, who had appeared to be the calmest man in the meeting. He urged Kennedy to resist the pressure to retaliate and not to let the situation "deteriorate into a head-to-head personal contest between the President of the United States and Fidel Castro."

At a second National Security Council meeting three days later, Bowles argued against proposals that the United States move directly against Castro. Such an invasion, he contended, would "compound the disaster," and "even if it succeeded, Castro would emerge as the hero in what would surely be viewed throughout the world as a struggle between David and Goliath." He felt his argument was brushed aside.

At the third meeting, however, the invasion was dropped. The emphasis was on clandestine harassment and possibly economic sanctions against nations such as Mexico and Brazil, which had voted in the U.N. to condemn the United States. The President vetoed the sanctions, saying that we had no alternative but to live with the humiliation our error had created and respect the attitudes of other nations who had disagreed with our actions.

Later that day Bowles found that the State Department cable drafted for the guidance of all U.S. embassies misrepresented the President's decision and seemed to instruct American envoys to bring pressure on their host governments to cut relations with Castro and sever trade with Cuba. Bowles got Secretary of State Dean Rusk to change the wording to reflect the President's more moderate views.

Encouraged by the President's attitude, Bowles recommended a drastic reform: the dismantling of the CIA and absorption of its non-covert functions by offices directly responsible to the State Department. Soon after the inauguration, he had proposed a more limited reorganization of the CIA, but the Bay of Pigs experience convinced him that a complete change was required. The President, however, was not prepared to take on the CIA in a major political battle, and since he was no more affirmative toward the State Department than toward the CIA, he was unlikely to see their combination as any gain.

The President's and the department's leadership were on trial throughout the spring of 1961 on the issue of Laos, where another Cuban situation, or worse, was developing. Between Kennedy's election and his inauguration, the Far Eastern Bureau of the State Department and the CIA helped to engineer a rightist coup against the neutralist regime of Prince Souvanna Phouma. In the first discussions of Laos within the new administration Bowles urged steps toward neutralization but found a surprising consensus in favor of a policy to save